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ABSTRACT

An American culture curricular unit is described for an integrated skills content based course of an intensive English program. There are five components to the unit, including: (1) listening and speaking; (2) reading and writing; (3) fieldtrips; (4) academic study skills; and (5) English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students as amateur ethnographers. It is through the process of acting as amateur ethnographers and learning about American culture that ESL students master the various skills and activities in these components. The unit has been found to be successful for ESL students in two significant ways: (1) it is an excellent means of helping them develop their English language skills, and (2) it has provided students with skills and techniques they could use to process and understand their cultural experiences. An outline of the unit is appended. (JL)

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Exploring America: An Ethnographic Unit in an ESL Curriculum

Many ESL teachers know that international students often find the transition to American culture a more formidable obstacle than the English language itself. In response to this situation, sensitive ESL teachers conscientiously incorporate materials and activities about American culture into their curricula. Very often, however, the study of American culture is just that - studying about American culture not systematically learning how to study American culture and experience it, so a profitable learning outcome can result. It was this situation which inspired my project of having ESL students become amateur ethnographers in their quest to learn about American culture.

In this paper, I will describe an American culture curricular unit I developed for an integrated skills content based course of an intensive English program in a mid-sized university in the United States. This unit was designed in the Summer of 1991 and piloted by teachers in the intensive English program in the Fall of 1991. Three aspects of this unit will be discussed: its creation, implementation, and evaluation.

Before describing the unit, a clarification of terms is necessary. An ethnographer is a special kind of cultural anthropologist who intensively studies people of a sub-culture or other culture. Through observing, listening, interviewing, and participating in

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the activities of the culture being studied, ethnographers learn much about their human subjects. They collect their information in a variety of ways either using a tape recorder, video camera, or pen and paper for taking notes. They then write-up this data as work known as an ethnography. This definition admittedly oversimplifies the notion and role of an ethnographer. However, it should be remembered that one of the purposes of the unit is to teach the ESL students some elementary ethnographic techniques is not to make them "real" ethnographers. Therefore, this definition is adequate for these purposes. Given this notion of an ethnographer, I developed a project which combines theories from the fields of cultural anthropology and TESL. As a practitioner in both fields, this dualistic perspective gave me a distinct advantage. For example, because of my experience of doing ethnographic fieldwork, I knew which techniques would be most appropriate for the ESL students in their study of American culture. Additionally, as an ESL teacher, I was sensitive to the needs of ESL students and teachers for whom the syllabus and materials were being created.

Before discussing the actual unit itself, I will outline the objectives associated with it (see Appendix A). The first objective was to integrate all the language skills. Because the curriculum of our EAP program is based on an integrated skills approach, the unit had equal proportions of listening, speaking, writing and reading activities. Students perfected these language

skills through the process of studying American culture and employing their ethnographic skills. The second objective was to give the students a systematic method of interpreting and understanding American cultural experiences. All too often the understanding of another culture is simply based on one's interpretation of their personal experiences or friend's anecdotes. While the value of these experiences are not to be negated, it is also necessary that students realize that there is a less subjective way of studying culture. They need to realize how their own cultural backgrounds, values, and beliefs, can influence and shape their interpretation of another culture. The third objective was to provide students with a working knowledge of American culture. Students were provided some concrete information that they could take away with them; this way they felt more secure about their learning experience. It should be noted, however, that the study of American culture, and culture in general, is much too dynamic a phenomena to reduce to a mere body of facts. Yet, at the same time, it is possible to compile general explanations about a culture. Finally, it is necessary to realize that in the particular context of this curricular unit, American culture refers to mainstream white middle class American culture. The unit does not advocate this sub-culture over any other sub-culture in American society. It is simply a fact that the value system of this particular group, the white middle class, predominates in American society at large. For an idea of some of the topics that were covered in the unit refer to Appendix A. There is quite a

range and this list is by no means exhaustive. Thus, the students know from the beginning that they were learning about a very specific type of American culture.

Given these objectives, I set about creating the unit. There are five components to the unit (see Appendix A): 1) listening and speaking, 2) reading and writing, 3) fieldtrips, 4) Academic Study Skills and 5) ESL Students as an amateur ethnographers. The last category is the foundation of the unit. It is through the process of acting as amateur ethnographers and learning about American culture that the ESL students master the various skills and activities in these components.

I will describe the unit by first describing the foundation component, "ESL Students as Amateur Ethnographers." This component set the direction and tone of the unit. Here, the students learned various observation, listening, interviewing, and participant observation skills. The students also learned the difference between description, interpretation, and evaluation. These were basic essential skills of any ethnographer, and the students needed to master them to effectively study American culture. So, when the students learned observation skills, they learned the difference between general, focused, and selective observations. They then learned when, why, and what kind of information they could learn from employing these different kinds of observations. Then once they understood how to use this skill they were asked to do an

activity where they could apply the skill they learned. A similar format was used for the other ethnographic skills. Finally, one activity which is very important to the students from an ethnographic perspective is the description, interpretation, and evaluation activity based on an activity in Gary Althen's American Ways. If students are going to be able to systematically and consistently study American culture, they have to be able to differentiate between these concepts. Through this activity the students discovered how their own cultural beliefs often filter their views about American culture. Students practiced this exercise by observing a situation of their choosing and then reporting orally on how they would describe, interpret, and evaluate it.

The various ethnographic techniques used in this unit were based on my own fieldwork experiences and James P. Spradley's books, The Ethnographic Interview and Participant Observation. Both these books are "how to" books aimed at students learning the ethnographic process.

The ethnographic component was central to the unit for two reasons. First, it provided the students with ethnographic techniques and skills they can use to interpret their experiences in American society. Once they have left the security of the ESL program, they can draw on these skills. Second, this ethnographic component served as a springboard to the other components. Many of the skills in this ethnographic component can be found in other

components. For example, interviewing skills can easily be a part of the listening and speaking component (see Appendix A). The very same skills that a successful ethnographer possesses can be utilized at a more general level. Therefore, when the students were acting as ethnographers and honing these ethnographic skills, they were implicitly developing their general listening and speaking skills.

The "Listening and Speaking" component had a number of activities: lectures, oral presentations, class discussions, debates, pronunciation activities, videos, and interviews. Each of these activities had some kind of an ethnographic or American culture perspective. For example, the students made oral presentations on various aspects of American culture. Through the process of researching one area of American culture and presenting it, they were working on their speaking skills. Watching videos allowed students to work on their listening skills, again, through the process of learning about American culture. While these activities were more skills focused, other activities, such as "Interview an American," were more ethnographically oriented. In this activity the students listened to a lecture instructing them on how an ethnographer conducts an interview. After they had a chance to discuss what they learned and to practice on each other, they had to interview someone who had been raised in the United States. Many students remarked about how diverse American culture is. They were often quite surprised. While this was a good lesson in and

of itself, the most significant point was that students gained valuable practice in listening, speaking, and communicative skills. They also learned about sociolinguistic competence. One last activity I would like to highlight was pronunciation. There were a number of different pronunciation activities. For example, one activity which was very enjoyable and easy to administer consisted of having the students read short passages into a tape recorder. The teacher then collected the tapes, listened to them and provided feedback on pronunciation and other matters. In piloting this unit, the teachers chose passages that reflected aspects of American culture. One passage, for example, discussed the life of a cowboy in Texas. Consequently, some of the language manifested characteristics of a regional dialect, namely a Texas accent. As the students were learning how to listen to and pronounce the standard words of the passage, they also had to contend with special words, like "ain't" and "horsin'." Thus, they became acutely aware of the relationship between language and culture and the ways in which this relationship is manifested. The teachers didn't make it a habit of having the students read too many passages like this, as they wanted to expose them as much as possible to standard American English. However, for illustrative purposes in terms of the American culture content, these exercises were invaluable.

The third component was "Reading and Writing." It was through activities in this component that the students explicitly learned

facts or knowledge about mainstream American culture. When the unit was piloted, American Ways by Gary Althen was the primary reading text. This text proved very useful as it was very topically oriented. Each chapter could be the starting point for a whole array of other activities. The students practiced their reading skills through a variety of activities such as timed and paced readings. Vocabulary development was also addressed in this component. In terms of writing, students were required to write research papers and keep a journal. Students explored different kinds of writing through their study of culture. For example, the exercise in observation skills proved a perfect opportunity to experience descriptive writing. In order to make writing a daily event for the students, they kept journals. Keeping a daily journal is a hallmark characteristic of an ethnographer doing fieldwork. The journal allows the ethnographer, at a later date, to see how personal feelings may have affected how s/he interpreted particular events. The teachers simply wanted students to have an opportunity to write. Finally, one writing activity which could be regarded as an application of the ethnographic interviewing skills was peer workshopping. In peer workshopping, students not only honed their writing skills but also learned how they could most appropriately critique a peer's work. This same negotiation process is also present in interviews. Thus, peer workshopping and ethnographic interviewing were mutually reinforcing processes.

Up to this point, I have mainly discussed the ethnographic skills

of observing, listening, and interviewing. Participant observation was used in the component, "Fieldtrips." Participant observation is when an ethnographer actually participates in the activities of the members of the sub-culture or culture s/he is studying. This situation is considered to mark a successful ethnographer because it means that s/he is acting and being accepted as a member of the culture being studied. When this ethnographic unit was piloted, the students visited museums, attended to football and basketball games, participated in various campus activities, shopped in stores, and did many other activities. Therefore, the students had many opportunities to learn and perfect their participant observation skills. It was through this activity that the students were truly experiencing aspects of American culture, and the value of this experience can not be overstated.

The last component of this unit was "Academic Study Skills." Indirectly, the entire time that students were studying American culture as amateur ethnographers, they were using some or all their academic skills to one degree or another, with the exception of test taking. For example, during the activity, "Interview an American," students had to be able to take quick and useful notes for later use. While writing their final paper for the unit, they had to employ research and library skills. Finally, as students negotiated their understanding of American culture by either reading, asking questions, listening to a lecture, or talking to someone, they were forced to employ their critical thinking skills.

After creation of the unit, the next step was implementation. The unit was created for two audiences: the ESL students and the teachers in the program. In terms of the students, I made sure they understood the unit's objectives. Since many of these students were already eager to learn more about American culture, they were very receptive to the unit. I was merely taking an aspect of their lives, their American cultural experiences, and bringing it into the classroom. Additionally, the teachers were careful to modify activities and materials as necessary to match the students' proficiency levels and needs.

In terms of the teachers, I provided two kinds of support: myself and a set of teacher notes. Before the implementing the unit, I met with the teachers to introduce it. In this short presentation, I pointed out the teacher notes, which accompanied the various activities and materials, and explained the organization of the unit, which was housed in a set of color coded manilla folders. In short, the unit was made as easily accessible as possible. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I demonstrated the flexibility of the unit. I wanted to ensure the teachers that they could modify any materials and activities as they needed to meet the specific needs of their students.

After implementation of my project, the last issue which needed to be addressed was its effectiveness. This assessment process constituted the last phase - evaluation. There were two sources

of information concerning the evaluation of this unit: the ESL students and the teachers who piloted the unit. At the end of the unit, the students were provided a questionnaire asking them what they liked best, least, and would change about the unit. Additionally, they were asked to rate several of the key parts of the unit, such as the text, American Ways, the ethnographic activities, and the lectures. Overall, the students indicated that they enjoyed the unit very much because as one student wrote, "it related to our real lives." To this end, it was not surprising that the students enjoyed the ethnographic activities the most, the ones that had them employ their various ethnographic skills. The aspect of the unit they disliked the most were the worksheets accompanying each chapter of American Ways. While the teachers were not sure, they suspected that the students did not like these worksheets because occasionally they were used check comprehension and were graded. Finally, a suggestion that was made by several students concerned the timing of the unit with respect to the rest of the curriculum. Many students felt that the unit, as an orientation to American culture and life, would be more valuable at the beginning of the semester, rather than at the end.

As for the teachers, a detailed account of their evaluations are beyond the scope of this discussion, however, there were several comments which I thought proved very insightful and supported the incorporation of a unit like this into an ESL curriculum. To begin with, while the teachers may have disagreed or not liked

certain activities or materials, they all thought the idea of an American culture unit was essential. In general, their criticisms were directed at very specific parts of the unit, parts which could be easily altered or dropped if necessary. For example, one teacher didn't like the text, American Ways. She thought that the author's own ideology and personal conception of American culture was far too prevalent throughout the book. While this particular teacher was irritated by this fact, she also felt that it provided the students an excellent opportunity in learning how to distinguish so called "fact" from opinion. In this respect, she was able to turn a potential weakness of the book into a constructive exercise.

Another criticism, also indirectly related to the book, concerned topics. One teacher felt that there needed to be more attention focused on social problems and issues (i.e., homelessness, hunger, racism, sexism, etc.). This was a valid comment, however, it is also necessary to realize that the key to understanding these problems also lies in understanding the mainstream American cultural value and belief system. Many of these social issues and problems manifest themselves in a particular way precisely because they are within a mainstream American cultural framework. Thus, one must understand the larger cultural framework to understand the issues.

Finally, one teacher pointed out that the unit introduced a unique

way for students to learn. By studying culture as amateur ethnographers, the students were constructing their ideas about American culture themselves. They were relying on what they saw and heard to make conclusions. This was a new way of learning for many of them. Not only did they have to rely on what they learned but most significantly they had to learn to trust themselves in this capacity. There was no teacher, book, or other authoritative source providing the definitive correct answer. In many ways this ethnographic/American culture unit was the ultimate form of having students take responsibility for their own learning.

This ethnographic/American culture unit was useful for ESL students in two significant ways. One, it was an excellent means of helping them further develop their English language skills. Two, in terms learning about American culture, it provided them with skills and techniques they could use to process and understand their cultural experiences. However, students and teachers should realize that this unit should be regarded as a starting point only. Understanding culture is a dynamic and negotiated process between the individual his/her personal experiences, and other people. A unit, such as this one, merely lays the framework for interpreting culture, the rest is up to the students.

Appendix A

Exploring America: An Ethnographic Unit in an ESL Curriculum

- I. Introduction
- II. Objectives
 - A. Integrate all the language skills
 - B. Give students a systematic method of interpreting and understanding American cultural experiences
 - C. Provide students with a working knowledge of American culture
- III. Creation of the American Culture/Ethnographic Unit

LISTENING AND SPEAKING

Lectures
Oral presentations
Class discussions
Debates
Pronunciation activities
Videos and movies
Interview an American

READING AND WRITING

Primary reading text
Research papers
Journal writing
Vocabulary development
Timed & paced readings
Peer workshopping

ESL STUDENTS AS AMATEUR ETHNOGRAPHERS

Observation skills
Listening skills
Interviewing skills
Participant observation
skills
Description, interpretation,
and evaluation

ACADEMIC SKILLS

Note taking skills
Library skills
Research skills
Learning strategies
Time management
Critical & analytical skills
Test taking skills

FIELDTRIPS

Shopping malls
Legal courts
Student unions
Restaurants
Museums
Football and baseball games

- IV. Implementation of the American Culture/Ethnographic Unit
- V. Evaluation of the American Culture/Ethnographic Unit

A Representative Sample of Topics Covered
in American Ways (Althen, 1988)

Politics	Female-Male Relationships	Driving
Studying	Nonverbal Communication	Family Life
Education	Sports and Recreation	Shopping
Religion	Behavior in Public Places	The Media
Studying	Nonverbal Communication	Personal Hygiene
Business	Social Relationships	Ways of Reasoning

References Consulted and Used in the Creation of the American
Culture/Ethnographic Unit

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- Spradley, J. 1980. Participant Observation. Fortworth, TX: Holt Rinehart and Winston. This book is an excellent teacher's guide to understanding the ethnographic process and various ethnographic skills and techniques.
- Spradley, J. 1979. The Ethnographic Interview. Fortworth, TX: Holt Rinehart and Winston. This is a companion book to Participant Observation. Both books together are somewhat redundant but they make excellent references.